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# Watching Mothers: Seeking New Normativities for Motherhood in the Sitcom *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004)

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- 1 In today's televisual landscape, on network and cable television as well as on the internet, viewers are presented with myriad variations on the theme of family and parenthood in the contemporary United States. From a homosexual couple raising an adopted child (*Modern Family*, ABC, 2009-) to recovering alcoholic single mothers (*Mom*, CBS, 2013-) to a divorced father negotiating his gender transition with his adult children (*Transparent*, Amazon, 2014-), these representations are in the process of interrogating what it means to be (and who is allowed to be) a parent. Idealized versions of nuclear families rooted in the televisual imagery of the 1950s which assigned rigid and gendered roles to mothers and fathers appear to be a thing of the past. Indeed the nuclear family has been described as "boringly 20<sup>th</sup> century"<sup>1</sup> as changes in Western societies are increasingly reflected on television. In contemporary series, families and the distribution of roles within them, appear to be messy, blurry and confused, though not necessarily unloving.
- 2 The transition has been gradual and different series during different decades have been more or less implicated in foregrounding changes regarding parenting normativities. In 1952 television censors prohibited Lucille Ball's character on *I Love Lucy* from using the word 'pregnant' to tell her husband and America that she was going to become a mother. Lucy was described as *enceinte*. Seven decades later, a series such as *Modern Family* is one of America's top ten network television shows, explicit childbirth scenes have become commonplace and the place of mothers and fathers in the family seems to be increasingly unsure.
- 3 One series which seems to be all but overlooked in any discussion of profound societal change is the planetary phenomenon *Friends*. The sitcom, which began its original prime time broadcast on the American television network NBC in September 1994, was almost immediately a smash hit. Its ten-season broadcast is testament to its audience

and industry approval and, at the height of its popularity, over 30 million people tuned in to watch new episodes every week. The final episode which aired on 5 June 2004 garnered 52.5 million American viewers. The series portrayed the lives of six young adults living in New York City: Monica Geller and her older brother Ross, Monica's roommate Rachel Green and her former roommate Phoebe Buffay, and neighbors Chandler Bing and Joey Tribbiani. As such, it was the first such series to "liberate itself from the model of the middle-class family to focus exclusively on 'Generation X (Andréolle, 2015:7).<sup>2</sup>"

- 4 It would, however, be wrong to assume that this sitcom has nothing to tell us about how a culture views its parents in general and its mothers and motherhood in particular. In spite of the series' focalization on Generation X, the characters' parents belonging to the Baby Boom generation made repeated appearances throughout the ten seasons. The influence they are portrayed to have in their adult children's lives is repeatedly emphasized and this is particularly true in the case of the mothers.<sup>3</sup> In addition, each of the female Generation X characters enters into motherhood at some point during the series' narrative and they each embody a different type of nontraditional motherhood: surrogacy, adoption, lesbian and single motherhood are all addressed during the ten seasons. The women belonging to the older generation of mothers are, with few exceptions, constructed to appear as responding to hegemonic ideals of the 'good' or 'traditional' mother. With the exception of Phoebe Buffay's mother(s), the characteristics of the women's mothering experiences – they are white, middle or upper-middle class and heterosexual; they conceived their children within the institution of marriage and for the most part remained at home to raise their children – solidly anchor these motherhoods within the "material practices that, though not explicitly sexual, are implicated in the hierarchies of property and propriety" which Berlant and Warner refer to as heteronormative (1998:548). In fact, these heteronormative representatives of Baby Boom motherhood are generally depicted as either dysfunctional, inappropriate, neglectful or some combination thereof. Meanwhile, various strategies construct the aforementioned alternative motherhoods – those which fall outside the narrow scope of heteronormativity – of the Generation X women so as to lend them credibility and legitimacy. Through content analysis I seek to bring to light the ways in which the representations of the mothers and motherhoods in *Friends* can be interpreted as contributing to the ongoing cultural dialogue concerning mothers and motherhood in America and, in turn, whether this contribution can be regarded as a negotiation of new maternal normativities. To address these issues more fully, I will briefly recall the processes at work in the sitcom genre and the significance of audience laughter. I will then turn to the representations of Baby Boom motherhood in this sitcom, specifically pointing to the ways in which they are constructed as humorous, even ridiculous. Finally, I will examine three of the four<sup>4</sup> representations of the Generation X alternative motherhoods in *Friends* highlighting the elements which seem to suggest a normative reading of them.

## Sitcom and Motherhood: Ideological Evolution through Laughter

- 5 According to Hamamoto, the sitcom is "the most popular American art form" and he suggests they be treated as "virtual textbook[s] that can be 'read' to help lay bare the

mores, images, ideals, prejudices and ideologies shared-whether by fiat or default-by the majority of the American public (1991 [1989]:10).” Mills adds that in order to succeed with audiences, representations must “conform to and utilize, normalized social conventions (2005:7).” Because sitcoms deal with interpersonal relationships they offer a particularly intimate imagery: between spouses, between siblings, between friends, between parents and children. Looking closely, then, at representations in sitcoms reveals two things: the socially accepted normalized conventions associated with a given group or individual at a given time but also the *dynamic* nature of these roles and relationships and how they uphold, challenge and/or mediate dominant cultural and political ideologies over time.

- 6 As its name suggests, sitcom communicates in the comedic mode and its roots in vaudeville and, later, radio broadcast bear witness to this. The laughter heard during a sitcom episode speaks to the communal element of humor and also serves to construct the sitcom’s message. This laughter, which until recently has been a standard generic component, is either the reaction of the live audience members gathered in the studio to watch the episode being filmed or artificial laughter added in post-production for those sitcoms which are filmed on closed sets. In many cases, real studio audience laughter is ‘sweetened’ (enhanced, augmented or reduced) with artificial laughter. Thus the laughter heard during an episode serves as a signal to the viewer and constructs an interpretive framework for the audience member at home. The invitation to read a specific element as humorous is an attempt “to close down alternative readings of its content, by suggesting that if you are not laughing at one of its jokes, then you’re the only one (Mills, 2005: 51).” Creating a communal focus for laughter suggests a widely-accepted agreement on what is funny and what is not, prescribing a consensus which may either reinforce or seek to negotiate existing normativities.
- 7 If the presence of audience laughter constructs viewers’ reading of a specific event or situation as humorous, its absence can equally be a signal to read the televisual text as serious (Mills, 2005: 51). The sequences dedicated to the alternative motherhoods in *Friends* appear to integrate humorous elements within larger, more serious narratives. Conversely, through the use of laughter, the representations of mothers of the Baby Boom generation are only very rarely constructed in a serious mode. The presence of these older mothers overwhelmingly results in laughter which is either a direct response to their presence and actions or a response to their adult children’s *reactions* to their mothers’ presence and actions. Whether the audience laughter is directed at the Baby Boom mothers themselves or is mediated through the main characters’ reactions to them, the cumulative effect is a repudiation of Baby Boom motherhood as dysfunctional and damaging. In terms of the motherhoods depicted in *Friends*, the presence or absence of laughter takes on a Foucauldian disciplinary charge, alternatively validating or repudiating the various images of motherhood in the series, while in the process, identifying, sorting and classifying maternal behaviors and the motherhoods associated with them on a spectrum of normal-abnormal.
- 8 Sitcom’s generic and historic association with the family, be it nuclear or reconstructed, creates a framework of expectations for the viewing audience. In the case of sitcom, this framework includes imagery from Golden Age sitcoms such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC, 1952-1966), *Father Knows Best* (CBS, NBC, 1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS, ABC, 1957-1963). The images of these traditional families including “a breadwinner father, a full-time homemaker mother and dependent

children” seem to remain a cultural standard (Coontz, 2000 [1992]: 23) even if, as Coontz has shown, this model was only the reality for a minority of Americans, for a very short period time and under very specific post-World War II circumstances.

- 9 The endurance of this highly restrictive imagery as “the norm” for family life in American collective memory can be attributed to its association with stability and with the “placidity and prosperity of the 1950s (Coontz, 2000 [1992]: 23).” In this version, normative motherhood is gender-specific, heterosexual, white, middle-class and is located within a marriage. The ideal mother does not participate in the public sphere of the paid labor force but instead remains at home and tends to the affairs of the private, familial sphere caring for her children and husband. In this vision of motherhood, the mother is generally self-effaced, putting her family’s collective needs before her own individual needs, wants and ambitions. The Baby Boom mothers of *Friends*’ main characters and the motherhoods they represent are, in significant ways, constructed as responding to this normative version and their very presence as maternal figures within the sitcom genre may serve to activate idealized images of motherhood for viewers. However, through the accumulation of their appearances, their actions, their characterizations and the effects they are shown to have on their adult children, these women are in fact portrayed as having negative, even damaging influences on their children. Consistently underscored by audience laughter, the dominant reading of these motherhoods is that they are ridiculous and laughable.
- 10 Judy Geller, the mother of main characters Ross and Monica Geller, is the first Baby Boom mother presented to the audience. She is also the most recurrent Baby Boom mother character in *Friends*. In all, she makes physical appearances in 19 episodes and is alluded to in several others. While Judy’s religious identity is never made explicit in the series, her actions and behavior are evocative of the stereotyped Jewish mother. Gushingly admiring and overprotective of her son Ross, she is hypercritical towards her daughter Monica and never misses an occasion to belittle her. In the second episode of the series,<sup>5</sup> within the span of a few minutes, Judy denigrates Monica’s career choice, criticizes Monica’s cooking and housekeeping skills and implies that she is somehow a failure because she is unmarried. The effects of Judy’s behavior are explicitly shown in this episode: Monica’s stress, the pressure she manifestly feels and her resignation that she cannot please her mother no matter how hard she tries portray Judy as demanding, cruel and unsupportive of her daughter.
- 11 In a later season, Judy hires Monica to cater a party only to reveal that she has made a bet that Monica would fail.<sup>6</sup> This episode also reveals that Judy has a special term for Monica’s mistakes (“pulling a Monica”) and that this term had been the source of psychological anguish during Monica’s childhood. Judy is also cited by her daughter as a voice of societal pressure influencing her (Monica’s) desire to have children.<sup>7</sup> Later, Judy not only refers to *Rachel* as “the daughter she never had,”<sup>8</sup> she is also portrayed as forgetting that her daughter Monica exists, suggesting that if Ross were dead she would be left childless.<sup>9</sup> The cumulative effect of these incidences which consistently focus on Judy’s unfairness to and neglect of her daughter Monica offer an overwhelmingly negative representation. In *Friends*, however, Monica is far from the only character shown to suffer from her mother’s actions and behaviors.
- 12 Nora Tyler Bing, the mother of Chandler Bing, appears in only four episodes of the series but her influence on her son is manifested not only in her physical appearances but also through the repeated references that Chandler makes about his dysfunctional

family life throughout the series.<sup>10</sup> Like Judy Geller, the character of Nora Bing also embodies some of the normative elements of motherhood: she is white, heterosexual, (upper) middle-class and was married at the time of her son's birth. However, the character of Nora Bing is persistently represented as being a source of shame for her adult son as well as a source of laughter for the sitcom audience. Nora Bing's first physical appearance on *Friends*<sup>11</sup> underscores the notion that hers is a highly inappropriate motherhood and that this has been the cause of much of Chandler's psychological anguish. The character is played by actress Morgan Fairchild, a striking blonde associated with dramatic roles in primetime soap operas such as *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1988), *Flamingo Road* (NBC, 1980-1982) and *Falcon Crest* (CBS, 1981-1990). Fairchild's portrayal of *femme fatale* characters in those dramatic series is reprised in the sitcom and used to construct her representation of Chandler's mother as both humorous (for the audience) and troubling (for Chandler).

- 13 In her first appearance, Nora Bing appears on a fictitious episode of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (NBC, 1992-2014) and all the friends save Chandler excitedly gather round the television to watch. Nora Bing is the successful author of erotic novels, a profession which underscores her own embrace of feminist sexual liberation. She dresses provocatively, speaks frankly about sexual pleasure on national television, and she has been arrested in relation to her sexual exploits. The character is presented as being overtly sexual, even dangerous. When the program's host specifically suggests that he doesn't see Nora Bing "as a mom," she explains that she is a "fabulous mom, I bought my son his first condoms." What could have been interpreted as the act of a responsible mother towards a son coming of age in the AIDS generation is instead presented as being deeply embarrassing for Chandler who is humiliated by this revelation much to the audience's amusement. While both Rachel and Ross express admiration for Nora's success and lifestyle, their comments are quickly cut down by Chandler who reminds his friends that he suffered as a child due to his mother's unusual profession.<sup>12</sup>
- 14 Nora Bing's inappropriateness as a mother is emphasized later in the same episode when, in the act of consoling Chandler's best friend Ross, she initiates a passionate kiss with Ross. Again, Chandler's perspective of a wronged son dominates this scene and while he is angry at both Ross and his mother (he refers to her as a "Freudian nightmare"), it is Nora Bing who receives a lecture from her son and is told to "grow up and be a mom." By acting on her unrestrained sexual impulses, Nora is characterized as too immature to be a proper mother and her sexuality is specifically linked to Chandler's fragile ego which he constantly sublimates through sarcasm and ironic humor. In this repudiation of Baby Boom motherhood, we may also see, more problematically, a repudiation of second-wave feminism and of the women's liberation movement. This is consistent with a more generalized backlash against women as put forth by Susan Faludi in that those qualities most closely associated with the movement of the 1970s, women's fulfillment and sexual liberation seem to be those most closely associated with negative psychological outcomes in the adult children in this series (Faludi, 1992 [1991]).
- 15 Sandra Green, the mother of Rachel, is also represented as being maternally deficient from her daughter's perspective. Like Nora Bing's character, the actress playing Sandra Green also brings intertextual significance to the role. Marlo Thomas who portrays Sandra was known to audiences for her role as Ann Marie, the lead character in the sitcom *That Girl* (1966-1971). The character of Ann Marie closely resembles the

character of Rachel Green three decades later. Both young women attempt to achieve independence by moving from the suburbs to New York City. While scholars may disagree about the ultimate level of independence achieved by Ann Marie (See Dow, 1996 and Spangler, 2003), she was, five years before the appearance of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the first popular female character to eschew marriage in favor of pursuing a career. This televisual context, while certainly evident only to older viewers, is employed with irony on *Friends* as Sandra Green is explicitly portrayed as being a victim of patriarchy yearning for something more.

- 16 Although she appears to embody many elements of normative motherhood (she is white, upper middle-class, heterosexual, married, and “never worked” outside the home), she arrives to announce that she is seeking to divorce her husband in order to gain her independence. This is met with dismay by her adult daughter Rachel.<sup>13</sup> Rachel is unable to sympathize with Sandra who positions herself as trapped within a patriarchal system which led her from her “father’s house to the sorority house to my husband’s house.” Furthermore, Sandra shocks Rachel by expressing curiosity about drug use, inquiring about sexual practices and insinuating that she could be potentially interested by a lesbian experience. These remarks and Rachel’s exasperated reactions to them elicit audience laughter. While Sandra’s desire for freedom from her unhappy marriage is poignant and Rachel eventually recognizes – but does not necessarily accept – her mother’s point of view, the episode highlights Rachel’s psychological distress which in turn portrays Sandra as selfish. Sandra’s seemingly breezy attitude contrasts with Rachel’s devastation and indicates that Sandra has failed to take into consideration her daughter’s psychological needs.
- 17 This cavalier attitude reappears six years later when Rachel herself is on the verge of becoming a mother.<sup>14</sup> Sandra attends Rachel’s baby shower and proceeds to undermine her daughter’s confidence in her ability to raise a child. Arguing that being a mother will be too “overwhelming” for Rachel she insists that Rachel hires a nanny and when she learns that her daughter cannot afford one, she decides to move in with Rachel in order to help. While the intention is well-meaning, Sandra shows little regard for what Rachel actually needs and wants although the fact that Rachel does not want her mother to move in is made very clear through close ups of Rachel’s facial expressions. Again, Sandra’s obliviousness is met with audience laughter.
- 18 In eroding Rachel’s confidence in herself and playing on her fear of failure at impending motherhood (fears which seem to be confirmed when Rachel is unable to correctly identify the baby-care objects she is given at the shower), Sandra’s lack of trust in her daughter’s mothering abilities undermines Rachel’s resolve and drives her to beg for her mother’s assistance. Sandra is only reassured that her help is not needed when Ross explains that because he is already the father of a young child, he will be there to help Rachel take care of their baby. As such, Sandra appears to be imposing the same rigid patriarchal structure on her daughter that she herself yearned to escape. Sandra Green then is also constructed as a mother who fails to take her child’s needs into account and in fact, puts her own needs before Rachel’s.
- 19 The audience laughter at the Baby Boom mothers’ antics suggests “an acknowledgement and understanding of the social values [their behaviors] disrupt (Mills, 2005: 10).” Mothers in a sitcom are communally understood to respond to traditional maternal normativities and the presence of laughter in relation to these mothers signifies that their representations disrupt these normativities and audience



expectations of them. The audience laughs because, in spite of appearances, these are not 'normal' mothers.

- 20 The mothers of Joey and Phoebe are not immune to the same techniques of implicit criticism which structure the representations of Judy Geller, Nora Bing and Sandra Green. When Joey learns that his mother Gloria is aware of and accepts her husband's extramarital affair because it makes him happier and he paradoxically treats her better,<sup>15</sup> he is outraged by his father's behavior and he struggles to comprehend his mother's knowledge and acceptance of the affair. His ideal of family life is shattered by the fact that his mother is willing to accept such an arrangement. Phoebe Buffay's mother is never seen on the series because she committed suicide when Phoebe and her twin sister Ursula were fourteen years old. This fact, along with her father's abandonment, is used throughout the ten seasons to explain both Phoebe's fractured and dangerous childhood<sup>16</sup> and her subsequent characterization as the quirky 'other' character who did not lead the same life trajectory as the other friends. Phoebe eventually discovers that her dead mother was in fact an adoptive mother and she is reunited with her biological mother.<sup>17</sup> The revelation that Phoebe Abbot and not Lily Buffay is Phoebe's biological mother, is accompanied by the revelation that Phoebe and her sister were conceived during a *ménage à trois*. Dismayed when her biological mother attempts to offer an explanation, Phoebe refuses to listen, instead accusing the Baby Boomer adults of "lying their asses off."
- 21 For Lynn Spangler, these parent-child relationships are "crucial, personality-shaping explanations of character behavior (2003: 218)." Within the comedic confines of the sitcom and particularly in *Friends*, this generation of mothers becomes the source of jokes to be laughed at. While their obvious struggles within and against the patriarchal heteronormative system they are part of could have been met with sympathy or even admiration from their adult children, instead, their desires for personal and sexual liberties and their subversion of traditional notions of self-sacrificing normative maternal behaviors cast these women as deficient mothers to a generation of children who have been raised (thanks, for instance, to earlier models seen on television) to expect their mothers to be self-effacing and all-giving.
- 22 Operating at a discursive level, the representations of these five mothers indicate that adherence to some of the values associated with the Baby Boom generation, including the (female) pursuit of personal fulfillment and liberation, makes for bad mothering as it comes at the expense of the following generation's well-being. *Friends* offers the results of motherhood as done by the Baby Boomers and the results are not good for their grown children, especially in the case of those mothers most conspicuously associated with women's liberation. The damning characterization of these mothers in *Friends* is particularly striking as the characters of their Generation X children each begin to enter motherhoods of their own during the later seasons of the program, motherhoods which unlike their own mothers' are no longer overtly coded as heteronormative. The characterization of these nontraditional motherhoods can be seen as a foil, as a contrasting discourse which serves to underscore the inappropriateness of the previous generation. Indeed, these later representations largely lack the consensus-forming disciplinary laughter associated with the Baby Boom generation implicitly hierarchizing them as more normal, or at least, less abnormal than the former.



- 23 To understand more precisely how the Baby Boom mothers in *Friends*, who at a superficial level differ very little from the Golden Age ideal of motherhood, are constructed as being at-odds with these images of maternal goodness, serenity and stability, and, conversely, how the next generation of mothers may, in fact, more legitimately represent an idealized image of motherhood, let us turn to what has been termed the ideology of *intensive motherhood*. Elucidating this ideology will enable us to understand how the Generation X alternative motherhoods depicted in *Friends* begin to be normalized particularly in comparison to the Baby Boom ones I have just described.

## Intensive Mothering and Alternative Motherhoods in *Friends*

- 24 In her influential monograph *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, sociologist Sharon Hays identifies the ideology associated with “the contemporary cultural model of socially appropriate mothering” as “intensive mothering (1996: x).” Briefly stated, this ideology is a “gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children (1996:x).” Hays identifies five contributing elements to intensive mothering ideology. It is *child-centered* (the child must be the center of its mother’s attention), *expert-guided* (the mother is expected to be informed of the latest advice and guidelines espoused by childcare experts), *emotionally absorbing* (the mother is expected to have a strong emotional bond with her child), *labor-intensive* (mothers are to expend enormous amounts of physical and intellectual energy on childrearing), and *financially expensive* (large quantities of money are spent on the child’s toys, accessories and activities). If intensive mothering has been identified by feminists and sociologists, it is not an explicitly stated ideology. Rather, “new momism” as Douglas and Michaels refer to the ideology, is “the prevailing common sense (2004: 7),” the “set of ideals, norms and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media” which set the standards for appropriate American mothering at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2004: 4).
- 25 Hays’s book was published in 1996, two years after *Friends* came on the air. While I do not suggest that the series’ creators made a conscious decision to portray the Generation X alternative motherhoods as adhering to such an ideology, it bears mentioning that Hays’s book identified the dominant mothering ideology of the cultural context within which *Friends* emerged. We may understand adherence to the various elements of this restrictive yet pervasive ideology (specifically as it is represented in *Friends*) as another Foucauldian disciplinary code<sup>18</sup> which, when carried out correctly is *not* met with laughter and thereby *not* seen as rupturing agreed upon norms. The extent, then, to which the mothers in this sitcom are represented as adhering (or not) to intensive mothering ideology proffers a normalizing discourse in terms of acceptable mothers and motherhoods. As we have seen, the mothers of the Baby Boom fall far short of the culturally resonant ideal of the typical sitcom mother. In contrast, the motherhoods typified by the Generation X mothers, while apparently occupying very different social statuses when compared to the idealized images of *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, may in fact resemble them more closely than they would initially suggest. This is due, in part, to the women’s depictions as understanding, accepting and (usually) adhering to intensive mothering ideology.

- 26 The first representation of Generation X motherhood in *Friends* occurred in the second episode of the first season and aired in 1994. In this episode, one of the series' recurring characters – Ross's ex-wife, Carol – announces that she is pregnant with his child and intends to raise the child with her lesbian partner, Susan. The pregnancy is represented in several episodes throughout the 1994-1995 season and Carol and Susan make further guest appearances in subsequent seasons as the mothers of Ben. The two women appear to be "the first lesbian parents in sitcomland (Frutkin, 1995:31)." The construction of this representation of motherhood suggests an attempt to minimize potential controversy. As *Friends* creator David Crane explained to LGBT-interest magazine *The Advocate* in 1995, "It's very significant that when you watch the show, you get the feeling that these two women are going to be good parents."<sup>19</sup> As such, this motherhood is constructed as an example of new momism, responding to elements of intensive mothering. Carol's pregnancy and motherhood is, from the start, child (fetus)-centered as the three future parents are shown putting much effort into choosing a name, talking and singing to the unborn child and attending childbirth classes.<sup>20</sup> It is also presented as being expert-guided. Carol and Ross both read books related to child care although these books manifestly belong to Carol.<sup>21</sup> The presence of experts throughout Carol's pregnancy is noteworthy and includes doctors and childbirth instructors, and Carol's breastfeeding in spite of the fact that it causes her pain suggests that she heeds the advice of experts who recommend breastfeeding as being better than bottled milk for babies. Even in her absence, Ben is fed Carol's breastmilk.<sup>22</sup>
- 27 Furthermore, Carol and Susan are shown to be emotionally absorbed by the gestating child: they are relieved to learn that it is healthy and thrilled to learn it is a boy.<sup>23</sup> Later, the same emotional absorption is focused on the child: Carol is anguished to leave Ben in Ross's care for a mere afternoon and she schools him in the baby's minute psychological and physiological needs, demonstrating that she is not only in tune to her baby's desires but is also able to anticipate his reactions.<sup>24</sup> Finally, each time Ben appears in the series as a baby, he is accompanied by a host of consumer items including teddy bears and dolls, baby carriers, bottles, cribs, car seats and diaper bags confirming that appropriate mothering requires spending large sums of money on babies and children.
- 28 Ross's paternal role is also noteworthy as the biological father of Carol and Susan's son Ben and, later, as the biological father of Rachel's daughter Emma. In both instances, Ross is shown to be a caring, involved father, who in many ways responds to the tenets of intensive mothering in all but its gendered aspect. His emotional investment in his children's lives is highlighted particularly in preparation for his son's birth. Ross attends childbirth classes and obstetrics appointments with Carol and Susan and later with Rachel and actively participates in their deliveries. While Ross is never Ben's primary caregiver and while no official shared parenting schedule is ever alluded to, during the early seasons of the series he is regularly shown to care for his son independently in the absence of the boy's mothers. For both of his children, Ross is shown actively engaging in some of the demanding physical childcare associated with intensive mothering: feeding, changing and clothing.
- 29 Ross's paternal behavior appears to be representative of a general trend towards increasingly involved fathers: if American fathers still only spend half the amount of time giving care to their young children as compared to mothers,<sup>25</sup> since the 1980s they

have increased the time they spend with their children by sixty-five percent on workdays.<sup>26</sup> Sociologist Gayle Kaufman suggests that this type of fatherhood is the “new norm in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (2013: 10).” Kaufman refers to the type of father represented by Ross as the “new father” who “takes time to eat with his family, reads to his children, throws a ball around, and even changes diapers (2).” She distinguishes the new father/dad from the more traditional “old dad” who spends limited time with his children and is often married to a stay-at-home mother and the more recent “superdad” who “deliberately adjust[s] their work lives to fit their family lives (7).” This “ideology of fatherhood” emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century at the nexus of changing cultural expectations and the ever-increasing participation of women in the labor force. The implications of this representation of intensive fatherhood both for motherhood and parenthood in general certainly merit more analysis than the scope of this paper will unfortunately allow.

- 30 A second occurrence of alternative motherhood sees Phoebe Buffay agreeing to be the gestational (surrogate) mother for her brother and his much older wife, who cannot have children on their own. This example of medically assisted maternity culminating in Phoebe’s birthing of her brother’s triplets is chronicled in detail. The audience is party to Phoebe’s decision-making process and is also witness to the in-vitro fertilization process.<sup>27</sup> As in the case of Carol and Susan’s lesbian motherhood, Phoebe’s surrogacy appears to be constructed in such a manner as to avoid possible controversy. Elements of intensive mothering ideology can again be detected in this representation and these elements contribute to construct this non-normative mothering situation within a normative mothering framework.
- 31 In fact, the narrative focuses very little on Phoebe herself as a gestating mother and even less on Alice, the biological mother of the triplets. Instead, it is focused first on the embryos (Phoebe is shown introducing herself to them in a petri dish and asking them to “really grab on” after implantation), then on the fetuses (and their needs which conflict with Phoebe’s own). This alternative motherhood may thus be understood within the ideological context of intensive mothering and the importance it places on the child’s supreme position in the mother/child dyad.
- 32 Indeed Phoebe’s biggest role in this narrative arc is repeatedly restrained to that of a selfless “container” for someone else’s children (“I’m just the oven. It’s totally their bun.”).<sup>28</sup> She is reduced and reduces herself to a maternal object reinforcing the subjectivity of the children-to-be at her own expense. This element of child-centeredness is reinforced in later episodes when Phoebe’s character begins to feel the effects of her pregnancy. A strict vegetarian, Phoebe begins to crave meat and interprets this craving to be one of the unborn children’s needs (“I can’t believe it. The baby wants bologna. The baby wants me to eat meat. I can’t eat meat!”).<sup>29</sup> Instead of maintaining her vegetarian diet Phoebe decides she must eat meat to satiate the baby for the duration of her pregnancy, thereby elevating the perceived needs of the fetus and subordinating her own. Douglas and Michaels remind us that the central tenet of new momism/intensive mothering is that “mothers inhabit [...] the ‘subject positions’ of [their] children as often as possible (2004: 19)” and Phoebe’s interpretation of her cravings as well as her renunciation of her vegetarian lifestyle demonstrate this aspect of the ideology. The focus on the embryos/fetuses paradoxically enables the narrative to present this example of motherhood as conforming to cultural norms of child-centeredness. Phoebe’s surrogacy, like Carol’s pregnancy, is also the occasion to

highlight the important role that expert guidance plays in culturally appropriate motherhood. This guidance comes in the form not only of the books on pregnancy that Phoebe reads but also of the fertility doctors wielding reproductive technology and the obstetricians who deliver her triplets.

- 33 Ultimately, it is the character's sacrificial selflessness which aligns this situation most closely to the ideal images of normative mothering. Through surrogacy, "[t]he representation of the "selfless" mother evolves [...] as these women appear to offer their bodies not to care for their own families, but rather in service to other potential parents (Nathanson, 2013: 149)." Phoebe's decision to bear the children is framed in precisely these terms of maternal generosity ("I'm going to be giving someone the greatest gift you can possibly give");<sup>30</sup> as such it may be interpreted as a repudiation of the circumstances of her own conception and birth which were characterized as dishonest, selfish and irresponsible.
- 34 A third, perhaps more conventional, example of alternative motherhood portrayed in *Friends* is that of Rachel Green, who in the fall of 2001<sup>31</sup> discovers she is pregnant after a one-night stand with ex-boyfriend Ross. Rachel decides to keep the baby but refuses to marry Ross because they do not love each other. Contrary to the other examples of motherhood in *Friends*, Rachel is actually seen raising her daughter Emma and her single motherhood is the most developed of the Generation X motherhoods. As in the previous situations, Rachel's character generally appears to have internalized the ideology of intensive mothering though she does not always choose to adhere to it. On those occasions, she is usually shown the error of her ways and forced to conform.
- 35 Like Carol and Phoebe during their pregnancies, Rachel also makes efforts to make her unborn child the focus of her attention. She gives up drinking alcohol and coffee, reads numerous books and magazines about pregnancy and receives regular pre-natal care by obstetricians. Her living spaces are progressively filled with recognizable high-end brands of child-care paraphernalia. At the beginning of the pregnancy, however, she is reluctant to give up dating men. This is demonstrated during an episode in which she tries to date one of Joey's colleagues.<sup>32</sup> By the end of the episode, Rachel has learnt that her own desires must now become subordinate to her role as an expectant mother. Rachel's date ends badly after she "made the mistake" of telling the man she was pregnant. Rachel realizes that her pregnancy is indeed life-changing and that as an expectant mother her life choices are restricted: "I guess I'm just done with the whole dating thing. It's just one more thing in my life that is suddenly completely different. This is hard." While the character is given this brief opportunity to evoke a sense of ambiguity about becoming a mother, the scene ultimately reinforces the child/fetus-centered tenet of intensive mothering ideology. While Rachel may express sadness about her transition from subjective, independent person to self-effaced mother-object, the transition is nonetheless represented as being a necessary, common-sense one. Ross, sitting by Rachel's side during this emotional moment, underscores the "naturalness" of the transition: "in about seven months, you're going to have something that you're going to love more than any guy you've ever gone out with. Just wait. Wait until the first time your baby grabs your finger. You have no idea." Rachel does not attempt to date again during her pregnancy and does not venture out without her daughter until Emma is several months old. In contrast to the Baby Boom mothers' flamboyance and overt interest in unconventional sex, Rachel's chastity reinforces her characterization as appropriately maternal.

- 36 Another attempt by Rachel to put her desires above her daughter's needs occurs once Emma is brought home from the hospital. Moved by the profound love she feels for her daughter (and thus displaying an absorbing emotional bond), Rachel decides to pick up the sleeping Emma in spite of Phoebe's warning that "you never wake a sleeping baby."<sup>33</sup> The baby quickly wakes up and cries for the entire episode as Rachel tries ever more frantically to soothe her. The crying is an admonition to Rachel who is portrayed as a mother simultaneously unable to anticipate her child's needs (in this case to sleep uninterruptedly), unwilling to put those needs above her own desires (to wake her newborn baby and hold her), and incapable of meeting the needs of the unhappy baby which is evidenced by the hours-long crying that ensues. Once the child has made it clear, through her incessant crying, that she will not be easily consoled, Rachel seems to comprehend the error of her ways first by apologizing to the baby and finally questioning her own worth as a mother ("I can't even comfort my own baby. I'm the worst mother ever.") If Rachel's character is not constructed as being as naturally selfless as intensive mothering dictates, when her behavior does transgress these limits she learns the error of her ways and either gives up the behavior or repents for it, gradually being disciplined by the ideology on her way to becoming a good mother in spite of being unmarried.

## Evolving Normativities

- 37 In *Friends*, the Baby Boom mothers who seem to typify normative motherhood thanks to their resemblance to idealized maternal images of a bygone sitcom era are, in fact, presented as abnormal because they do not respond to the tenets of intensive mothering ideology. Instead, they are positioned as being selfish by putting their own needs and desires ahead of their children's. The audience is cued to read this as bad parenting because the narrative perspective focuses on the disappointment and psychological distress felt by the adult children; the audience laughter at these mothers and their behaviors constructs the framework within which these representations may be understood. Conversely, none of the mothers of the younger generation engage in traditional forms of motherhood and yet these mothers are, in general, valorized through their characterizations as either responding to or learning that they must respond to intensive mothering ideology by adopting child (and fetus)-centered behaviors to the point of self-effacement.
- 38 The analysis suggests a shift in maternal ideology. This shift, however, must be qualified: the Generation X representations undoubtedly offer a more inclusive vision of culturally appropriate mothering (while still neglecting motherhoods which fall outside of white, middle to upper-middle class paradigms) and yet it would appear that if women have gained more freedom to choose motherhood on their own terms outside of narrowly prescribed social parameters, there may be a price to pay. This price may be the equally confining and narrowly defined parameters of intensive mothering ideology which is, in *Friends*, and in late-20<sup>th</sup> century America as a whole, the standard for acceptable mothering. To explain the dominance of this ideology, Susan Hays posits that the relationship formed between mother and child as a result of intensive mothering serves as a symbolic "opposition to social relations based on the competitive pursuit of individual gain in a system of impersonal contractual relations (1996: 18)." The supposed purity of the mother-child relationship which is gained by the mother's

efforts to appropriately raise her child serves as a buffer to an otherwise overwhelming corporate capitalist mentality which has only become more invasive as more women have joined the paid work force. A wider definition of normative motherhood may ultimately have meant a more demanding and restraining one for women. The increasing role of paternal involvement as represented through Ross's character renders even more complex the dynamics of appropriate motherhood. It is undeniable that a certain liberating potential is released through the representations of mothering and motherhoods which are not restricted to heteronormativity. This potential is however seemingly tied to an underlying regression which draws motherhood back to restrictively prescribed normativities. To borrow Adrienne Rich's vocabulary, while the series opens up new spaces of motherhood as *experience*, it simultaneously serves to anchor these new forms even more deeply within the *institution* of motherhood.<sup>34</sup> As such, it is possible to question the true radical potential of these representations which seem to require, above all else, subservience to children. We may then wonder to what extent traditional notions of motherhood are altered by these alternative portrayals or, alternatively, to what extent the institution of motherhood as represented by intensive mothering ideology serves to domesticate these nontraditional forms of motherhood.

- 39 In a very different context – 1970s British punk subculture – Dick Hebdige explains the processes at work when a marginalized group is absorbed by a dominant ideology:

[Members of the subculture] are simultaneously returned, as they are represented on TV and in the newspapers, to the place where common sense would have them fit. It is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology...<sup>35</sup>

- 40 By situating the nontraditional motherhoods portrayed in *Friends* within the confines of intensive mothering ideology, we see that these alternative mothers can simultaneously redefine motherhood while occupying “the place where common sense would have them fit.” Likewise, in coding these mothers outside of heteronormativity but as yet responding to the “essential type<sup>36</sup>” of the mythical good mother – caring, unselfish, and desexualized – these motherhoods may be tamed, disciplined and thereby made comprehensible and acceptable.
- 41 Eventually, the complex interplay of representation, laughter and ideology as portrayed in this sitcom suggests that while the concept of normative motherhood may be expanding to include alternative representations (lesbians, surrogates, single women and even men), this expansion is made possible only by a process of heteronormalization which includes an adherence to the hegemonic and heteronormative institution of idealized motherhood. As Berlant and Warner suggest, “Hegemonies are nothing if not elastic alliances, involving dispersed and contradictory strategies for self-maintenance and reproduction (553).”

## Conclusion

- 42 *Friends* has been off the air for over ten years and in that time further ideological shifts in parenting appear to be taking hold on network television and elsewhere. Representations of mothers, fathers and families have only increased in diversity and fathers increasingly appear to be the practitioners and upholders of what may now be called intensive parenting. The dominance of the white, middle-class families on

display in *Friends* may (slowly) be giving way to more racial and ethnic diversity, while, just recently in film, the 2016 success of *Bad Moms* (written and directed by John Lucas and Scott Moore) suggests that a partial rejection of intensive mothering ideology may be taking hold, thus testifying to the ongoing cultural negotiations on what it means to be a good mother.

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## NOTES

1. Laubie, "Gay Parents On TV: Why The 'New Normal' Is No Longer Just The Nuclear Family" , [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/07/gay-parents-tv\\_n\\_4402297.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/07/gay-parents-tv_n_4402297.html)
2. "Friends fut la première série à s'affranchir du modèle de la famille de la classe moyenne pour se focaliser exclusivement sur la « génération X »" [My translation].
3. Judy Kutulas points to the intergenerational tensions at work in *Friends* and its sitcom contemporaries: parents of the Baby Boom generation are "embarrassingly sexual, having affairs" and "[t]heir motives are selfish, and their actions shatter their children's security, identity, and sense of morality (2005 : 57)."
4. The character of Monica Geller spends the ten seasons of *Friends* yearning to become a mother, learns that she is infertile in the ninth season and, along with husband Chandler, becomes the adoptive mother of twins in the series' final episode. While there is much to be said about the representation of Monica as a future adoptive mother (particularly in her relationship to her children's birth mother), Monica is seen mothering her newborns for only the briefest of moments. For the sake of space, I will not address this representation.
5. [S01xE02], "The One with the Sonogram at the End"
6. [S04xE03], "The One with the Cuffs"
7. [S02xE24], "The One with Barry and Mindy's Wedding"
8. [S09xE07], "The One with Ross's Inappropriate Song"
9. [S09xE17], "The One with the Memorial Service"
10. Chandler also reserves intense criticism and blame for his father, Charles Bing, a gay transsexual whose affair with the family's 'houseboy' is suggested as the cause for his parents' divorce. But Charles Bing only appears briefly on the series and his appearance is in a supportive role at Chandler's wedding to Monica. His presence does not prove nearly as disruptive as Nora's does.
11. [S01xE11], "The One with Mrs. Bing"
12. Chandler to Rachel: "Yeah, well you wouldn't think [having a mother like Nora] was cool if you were eleven years old and all your friends were passing around page 79 of *Mistress Bitch*."
13. [S02xE11], "The One with the Lesbian Wedding"
14. [S08xE20], "The One with the Shower"
15. [S01xE13], "The One with the Boobies"
16. Phoebe moved to New York City after her mother's death where she was confronted by homelessness and hunger, engaged in theft and violence, and had some unspecified association with a pimp.
17. [S03xE24], "The One at the Beach" and [S04xE01], "The One with the Jellyfish"

18. In *Surveiller et Punir*, Foucault describes the process by which disciplinary systems (in the fields of education and health among others) lead to the creation of the Normal which he suggests may be a “new law” in modern society (1975: 186). We can imagine intensive mothering ideology as a disciplinary system which regulates maternal behavior by creating a “normal” standard of maternal behavior.
19. Frutkin, Alan “Family Outings: The Arrival of a Bouncing Baby Boy on Friends makes Headway for Lesbian Families,” *The Advocate*, No. 682, p. 30-31, May 30, 1995, p. 31.
20. [S01xE02], “The One with the Sonogram at the End”; [S01xE09], “The One Where Underdog Gets Away”; [S01xE16], “The One with Two Parts- Part 1”
21. In “The One with the Dozen Lasagnas” [S01xE12] Ross returns a large sack full of childbirth and baby books to Carol in her apartment after having read some of them in the previous scene.
22. [S02xE02], “The One With the Breast Milk”
23. [S01xE12]
24. [S02xE02]
25. *State of America’s Fathers: A MenCare Advocacy Publication*, (2016), p. 10.
26. *Ibid.* p. 11.
27. [S04xE11] and [S04XE12] “The One with Phoebe’s Uterus” and “The One with the Embryos” respectively. The objectification of Phoebe as a surrogate mother is evident even in the title of the former episode while the focalization on the children-to-be is made clear in the title of the latter. Phoebe’s role as an expectant mother is downplayed to that of a gestating woman.
28. [S04xE11]
29. [S04xE16], “The One with the Fake Party”
30. [S04xE11]
31. Donna Andréolle suggests a link between the Rachel-is-pregnant narrative arc and the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (28). Indeed, the final scene of this first episode following the attacks provides evidence for this interpretation: just after learning that Rachel is pregnant and that she is in fact going to keep the baby the viewer reads the following on a black screen: “Dedicated to the people of New York City.” It would point to another potential normalizing element of Rachel’s situation: fertility and motherhood, normative or otherwise, for the sake of unity and patriotism.
32. [S08xE05], “The One with Rachel’s Date.”
33. [S09xE02], “The One where Emma Cries”
34. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich distinguishes the *experience* of motherhood as ‘the *potential relationship* of any women to her powers of reproduction and to children’ from the *institution* of motherhood, ‘which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control.’ (p. 13)
35. From Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* as quoted in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, p. 2484.
36. Barthes, 1957, p. 267.

## ABSTRACTS

This article will study the representations of mothers and motherhood in the famous NBC sitcom *Friends*. Anchored in the idea that the sitcom as a genre is a site where ideologies and cultural

evolutions and tensions are displayed and (re)negotiated under the cover of humor, we will, using content analysis, study the ways in which the sitcom played a role in the normalization process of so-called alternative motherhoods.

Cet article propose d'étudier les représentations des mères et de la maternité dans *Friends*, célèbre sitcom américaine des années 1990-2000, diffusée sur la chaîne NBC. Partant du principe que la sitcom en tant que genre est un site de négociations culturelles sous couvert d'humour, on explorera, à travers des analyses de contenu, la manière dont la sitcom a pu contribuer à normaliser des maternités dites alternatives.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** television series, sitcom, representation, normativity, motherhood, intensive motherhood

**Mots-clés:** séries télévisées, sitcom, représentation, normativité, maternité, maternité intensive

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